

Melancholic and Hungry Games: Post-9/11 Cinema and the Culture of Apocalypse

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The question of why we choose to watch certain films can be one of the most rewarding paths to social criticism. It is a question that becomes particularly interesting when it is applied to the apocalyptic film culture, which has retained a popular appeal throughout the last decade and more. Apocalyptic films invariably depict massive-scale destruction and the end of life as we know it. Are they popular because the experience is cathartic, because it is escapist in a particular cultural frame, or because our obsession with the end of things has been spoken across the ages as something inbuilt in the human species? There is no easy way to answer such a question, but to examine the way in which these films have changed in accordance with recent history can perhaps allow an inside glimpse into their power and enduring appeal.

My personal interest in apocalyptic film originated some time ago when I came upon Fredric Jameson's statement, "It is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism."ⁱ However bleak this idea is, recent history has demonstrated that even major shifts in global power relations, such as those witnessed on 9/11 and in the aftermath of the still ongoing global financial crisis, can do little to disturb the embedded social principles of capitalism. I wish to take Jameson's statement a little further and talk about the price we pay for this inability to imagine a future without capitalism, and suggest that it has further implications with regards to the virtual disappearance of utopianism in contemporary culture. Of course, there is a slight contradiction in this statement: clearly, to imagine the end of the world is, at the same time, also to imagine the end of capitalism.

Given that apocalypse and utopia are two quite radically different (although

admittedly not mutually exclusive) ways of looking beyond capitalism, it is fascinating to consider that one is popular today, while the other is not. And so there are two things to consider here, quite beyond our inability to get loose from what has become the capitalist imperative: not just the cost of the absence of utopia, but also the cost of our obsession with apocalypse.

The continued popularity of apocalyptic films is surely a testament to our cultural preoccupation with the end of the world, but why is it that an event such as 9/11--an event that certainly threatened global change--has seemingly offered a reinforcement of the self-same structure that provoked the strikes on the Twin Towers in the first place? Why is it that, when change threatened, many chose to stop believing in it altogether? Barack Obama's successful 2008 presidential campaign was fought on the back of the slogan, "Change we can believe in," a slogan that highlights widespread cynicism in not just the ability of politics to make a meaningful contribution to global change but also the possibility of change at all. Indeed, it is somewhat ironic that 9/11 has been so frequently pronounced as the moment when "everything changed," since most people who were not directly involved got up, brushed themselves off, and went back to work. On the day of the attacks, President George W. Bush immediately signaled to the American public that it would be business as usual: "Our financial institutions remain strong and the American economy will be open for business as well."ⁱⁱ The attacks were couched not as attacks on U.S. ideology, on capitalism, or on globalization but as attacks on "freedom." This was the beginning of a careful and systematic attempt to reinforce the status quo that had been threatened by 9/11, an agenda supported not only by government policy and rhetoric but, in large part, by culture and the media, too.

For those scholars who have begun what will inevitably be a long process of analysis, evaluation, and re-evaluation of the cultural response to

9/11, claims that the attacks “changed everything” are to be found at almost every turn.ⁱⁱⁱ But this claim begs a more serious analysis. Just how did 9/11 change everything? While I do not wish to dispute that there has been a sweeping historical, political, and cultural impact, such a globalizing statement is intentionally confrontational. Surely the two planes striking the twin towers that day did not change everything, they merely fostered the perception that everything had changed.

It is true, however, that 9/11 did demand a new way of thinking and talking, not least because it seemed to trivialize the voices of scholars who had declared experience and culture bankrupt at the end of the twentieth century. This time, experience had come back to bite us, and it was a collision between the image and reality which became the focus. As Jean Baudrillard argued, “The terrorist act in New York has resuscitated both images and events.”^{iv} Yet, with this statement in mind, it seems odd that the actual make-up of the apocalyptic image has featured so little in the theoretical literature surrounding the event.^v While much of the published criticism to date seems to be primarily concerned with what films are being made, the important question of, how films are being made remains relatively untouched. This is where rather than being merely descriptive about the landscape of post-9/11 film an emphasis should be placed on the aesthetic and narrative consistencies evident in post-9/11 film and culture.^{vi}

Apocalypse as Genre

Contemporary genre theory, chiefly associated with such critics as Steve Neale and Rick Altman, establishes that the popularity of various genres is cyclical, and therefore periods of generic proliferation repeat themselves. These cycles can frequently be traced to periodic societal concerns. The term “cycle” is an attempt to take genre studies, which has traditionally adopted a synchronic view of film history, and make it diachronic. But beyond this, it is a way of examining the evolution of

genres and sub-genres which helps to account for the problems of maintaining novelty and creation in the film industry. As Altman states, “New cycles are usually produced by associating a new type of material or approach with already existing genres.”^{vii} What we tend to see when we discover new themes, materials, locales, and aesthetics in what would otherwise fit an older mode within a pre-existing genre, is not a new genre but a new cycle.

While it could be argued that the current wave of disaster/apocalyptic films is a continuation, and decline, of an earlier cycle, which began in the late 1990s, there are reasons why this current wave should be considered a cycle in its own right. First, films that appeared in the latter half of the 2000s exhibit significant stylistic differences from those in the late 1990s. Secondly, the two film cycles appear to respond to different historical events. Films from the late 1990s have distinct millennial concerns, whereas those in the late 2000s respond to a cultural pessimism imbued by the events of 9/11. The 1990s wave of Hollywood disaster movies itself represents a recycling of the invasion movies of the 1950s—Radar Men from the Moon (1952); Invaders from Mars (1953); Target Earth (1954)-- and the disaster movies of the 1970s—The Andromeda Strain (1971); The Poseidon Adventure (1972); The Towering Inferno (1974). In his book Disaster Movies: the Cinema of Catastrophe, Stephen Keane identifies the following reasons for the 1990s re-emergence of disaster movies:

- 1—The public’s fascination with the impending millennium.
- 2—The absence of any concrete set of villains (after the end of the Cold War).
- 3—The advancements in special effects technologies allowing for a cinematic experience in which literally anything imaginable could be realized onscreen.

4—The ease with which these films could be watched as largely escapist entertainment.

5—The fact that they were making money.^{viii}

Interestingly, not even one of these reasons is particularly applicable to the current spate of post-9/11 apocalyptic films.

Although millennial fears have been replaced by fears about climate change and ecological disaster, as well as the pervasive threat of terrorism, there is now a tangible villain figure (that of the terrorist himself). While there have been advancements in technology, and these have been evident in contemporary apocalyptic cinema, there is little that can be achieved onscreen now that could not have been visualized in the late 1990s. Furthermore, films today are often not easy to watch and not family films. Instead, the majority tend to be violent and gritty films about the inevitable destruction of our way of life. Finally, and perhaps most tellingly, they are not even making that much money compared to the 1990s films: although it is true that most of the films made after 9/11 saw reasonable returns, the recently acclaimed adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's novel The Road (2009) grossed less than thirty million dollars at the box office, world-wide.

A brief examination of box-office receipts shows that in general post-9/11 apocalyptic films have been less successful than their late 1990s counterparts. Throughout the last decade there have been some significant successes: I Am Legend (2007) grossed \$256 million (sixth highest grosser of that year), War of the Worlds (2005) \$234 million (fourth highest of the year), and The Day After Tomorrow (2004) \$186 million (seventh highest of the year).^{ix} But for every success there was also a flop: Legion (2010, with Paul Bettany and Dennis Quaid) grossed a paltry \$40 million (ranked seventh-seventh for the year); The Core (2003, with Aaron Eckhart and Hilary Swank), \$31 million, (ranked ninetieth); 28 Weeks Later (2007, a sequel to the 28 Days Later [2002]), \$28 million (ranked eighty-seventh).

Sunshine (2007, with Cillian Murphy as an astronaut sent off to reignite the failing sun) failed to make the top 100 in the same year.^x Comparatively, 1998 had three apocalypse films in the box-office top ten: Armageddon in second rank, with a \$36-million opening weekend and more than \$350 million worldwide so far; Deep Impact in eighth rank, opening with \$41 million and running to a similar global figure now; and Godzilla right behind it, opening with \$44 million and accumulating almost \$380 million to date. In 1997, Dante's Peak, The Fifth Element, and Volcano made respectable opening-week returns of \$50 million between them and have, as a trio, grossed some \$565 million so far. In 1996, Independence Day topped the box-office chart with a gross in excess of \$300 million. Add in the fact that these figures are not inflation-adjusted for the earliest years and the margins appear even larger. This all begs the question: why these films and why now?

The End of Optimism: Apocalypse Film post 9/11

When we sit down to watch Armageddon, Independence Day, or The Fifth Element, we already know that, come the eleventh hour, humanity will save itself. Redemption is the point of these films: the world must be saved so that in films to follow it can be blown up all over again. In the current post-9/11 environment as seen onscreen it is the end of the world itself that is inevitable, so taken for granted that the cause has become almost irrelevant. In Albert and Allen Hughes's The Book of Eli (2010), we are merely told that "The war tore a hole in the sky." Is this a reference to nuclear explosion, to some futuristic weaponry, or to God's judgment? In John Hillcoat's The Road, the issue of what caused the apocalypse is sidelined by the protagonists' simple need to survive; we are left to make assumptions: perhaps it was environmental, perhaps nuclear. All we know is, "The clock stopped at 1:17. There was a long shear of bright light, then a series of low concussions." In Alfonso Cuarón's Children of Men (2006),

humans have inexplicably become infertile. It is not that the causes of disaster in these films are insignificant or petty. There is no doubt that the audience wants to know why apocalypse has happened. But by not telling us, the films make a statement about our world today, about the inevitability of destruction and its source in a zone beyond our ability to question, comprehend, or strategize.

On the whole, Post-9/11 apocalyptic fiction represents a movement away from the escapist images of destruction seen in the late 1990s. While there are still a number of films which revel in over-the-top and brilliantly graphic set pieces of destruction--particularly Roland Emmerich's The Day After Tomorrow and 2012 (2009) (he is a director who certainly seems to relish the prospect of disaster)—it remains the case that most post-9/11 apocalypses are depicted in dark and thought-provoking films, bringing home the harsh realities of a world gone to hell and a planet slowly dying. The worst visions of destruction seen in such films as Independence Day were made concrete and witnessed on September 11th. Post-9/11 films no longer need to offer speculation about the future, but instead purvey a realization of what is occurring in the here and now, perhaps implying that although we understand our eventual plight we are powerless to prevent it. There is something sublime in this very description; the idea that we are careening towards a dramatic and spectacular end; that the finale will be glorious, vast, universal in scope. Just as the images witnessed on our television screens on September 11, 2001 were sublime in themselves, they have re-configured the audience's perception of scenes of destruction. Post-9/11 apocalyptic films have frequently traded in a different kind of sublime effect, moving away from the depiction of destruction itself and focusing instead on aftermaths, huge and unbounded expanses of devastation and waste, and the fate of the survivor.

Post-9/11 apocalypse films tend to be isolationist. In the 1990s apocalyptic blockbusters' scripts concentrated on the problem of working in teams. Lead characters relied upon a network of partners, sidekicks, agents, assistants, and functionaries to help guide them to a solution that would save the planet. Thus, in Independence Day we have the macho Captain Steven Hillier (Will Smith) bringing his brawn to the aid of traditional science boffin David Levinson (Jeff Goldblum). Along the way we meet many side characters, most notably the American President (Bill Pullman) and a group of pilots who also have important roles to play in the eventual defeat of the alien invaders. In Emmerich's Godzilla there is a very similar set-up, the science boffin, Dr. Niko Tatopoulos (Matthew Broderick), needing the assistance of French secret service agent Philippe Roaché (Jean Reno). Once again we have the interference of an authority figure, Mayor Ebert (Michael Lerner), as well as a romantic sub-plot, the American military, and the cameo comedy performance of 'Animal' (Hank Azaria). In Michael Bay's Armageddon, Bruce Willis's Harry Stamper escorts a drilling team into space in an attempt to prevent an asteroid from hitting the Earth, an operation that is only possible with the help and support of NASA, and which would also have failed if it were not for the exploits of a crazy Russian astronaut, Lev Andropov (Peter Stormare). Stephen Keane notices the importance of a team mentality within the film:

Repeatedly throughout the film Stamper is referred to as a Red Adair, "the world's best deep core driller," but fundamentally his leadership principle is tempered with the value of teamwork: "I'm only the best because I work with the best."^{xi}

Lev's portrayal of stereotypical Russian eccentricity is somewhat indicative of these films' attitude towards notions of racial difference. As played by a Swedish actor who moved to the U.S. in 1993, Lev's role as the comic relief brushes over nearly half a century's worth of Cold War history. The 1990s

liberal sensibility, which also seems in these films to be dealt with reductively in the space of an hour and a half to two hour script, is all pervasive; as Lev himself pronounces, “Components. American components, Russian components. All made in Taiwan!” The message of these films is clear: by working together, any possible disaster can be averted, from erupting volcanoes and asteroids to giant lizards and alien invaders.

When this is contrasted with contemporary post-apocalyptic films we tend to find a rather different approach in the latter. Here our characters are lone survivors. They are often hardened types: men who have learnt how to survive in the harshest of worlds, men who take no prisoners and who stop for no one. A particularly pure example can be seen in The Road, as much an apocalyptic drama as an action movie. A man and his son (Viggo Mortensen, Kodi Smit-McPhee) wander through a post-apocalyptic wasteland, heading south to the coast in search of warmth and food. In this place where hope does not exist and survival is everything, (but also, apparently, a fruitless endeavor), the pair struggle to keep sight of their humanity. Father and son endure through extreme circumstances, constantly on the look out for groups of cannibals, their greatest fear. That this is to be the darkest of films is established early on when the father shows his son how to shoot himself in case they are captured. When the two finally reach the coast they find not salvation and respite, but as grey and dead a landscape as we have seen throughout the movie. Despite the narrative strategy of the son being adopted by a family at the end of the film, after the father has died leaving him to fend for himself, this is without doubt a film harboring a deep pessimism towards the future.

The Road is filled with isolation. While the father relies on the boy for survival—emotional, not physical--this is still a film in which they do not find a society to join. When they do meet a character who does not want to

eat them, the father's survival instincts tell him they should move on as quickly as possible, and so bonding with the other is foreclosed. These principal figures are also isolated by the camera, long-shots of the pair framed against the hostile environment predominating. These shots have become a staple of post-9/11 apocalyptic cinema and can be seen frequently in other films such as 28 Days Later, The Book of Eli, and I am Legend. Culture, sociability, relationship, bonding—all are broken away.

I Am Legend begins with a scene in which Robert Neville (Will Smith) speeds through the streets of a totally evacuated Manhattan chasing deer. There is a playful, fantasy element to the way he drives, with the shiny red sports car reflecting light and Neville skilfully using sidewalks as shortcuts. This is his city, now. He is free to break into houses, take DVDs from the rental store, hit golf balls at cars left abandoned. His only companion is a dog whose primary function in the narrative appears to be to give Neville someone to talk to for the first half of the film. When his dog dies after being bitten by one of the infected who, a strange cross between vampire and zombie, populate the city at night, he is for the moment left utterly alone. Hardened and self-centered, the men in these films are not removed from emotion. They cling to a shred of life without which they see no reason to be. In The Road this talisman is the boy, in I Am Legend it is the dog. Neville's response is to attempt to commit suicide while taking as many of the infected with him. Fortunately he is rescued by a woman and now, with companionship (if not also sexual availability) restored, he is able to carry on and eventually complete his quest to find a cure for the devastating infection.

I Am Legend may have a hopeful ending, as Neville's cure is taken to a survivor's colony, but ultimately he has given his life to protect it. This is a familiar ending for the contemporary post-apocalyptic film: we have already seen that Mortensen's character dies at the end of The Road, along

with the centrally important Eli (Denzel Washington) in The Book of Eli and the hero figure Theo Faron (Clive Owen) in Children of Men. But if, as these films would suggest, the apocalypse is unstoppable, and if our heroes die for just a small glimmer of hope, what is it that is finally being offered? Why do we continue to watch them? The fantasy elements we see in the story of the lone survivor do not seem escapist in the way that 1990s cinema sought escapism through the destruction of the “indestructible” (our buildings and way of life). In the 1990s we knew that when a lead character actually died (Harry Stamper in Armageddon, or Arnold Schwarzenegger in End of Days [1999]), he died in order to save our world. What, however, are we saving now through the sacrifice of the hero in the post-apocalyptic world?

Conclusion: A Hungry and Literal End

It is always important to reflect consciousness of context in any piece of work. It can be all too easy, when focused so closely on one small area of culture, to overlook the bigger picture. While I have labelled all of these films as post-9/11, this does not mean that they are a product of 9/11 alone. These films are of course products of the decade just passed since 9/11, a decade that has seen the advent of new kinds of war and that has been plagued by financial collapse, economic and global strife, and concerns about the future sustainability of the planet and of our way of life. While 9/11 may be the defining moment in Western culture over the past decade, there is no doubting the influence of these other forms of social disaster.

Gary Ross’s 2012 adaptation of Suzanne Collins’s novel The Hunger Games is a film which draws on many of these contemporary fears and issues. In many ways an old fashioned dystopic text in the mold of 1984, The Hunger Games thrusts its audience into a world that has been vividly and clearly divided along class lines. Ross creates a film charged with a visual style that plays to the idea of social division and expresses the

rich/poor dichotomy upon which the futuristic dystopia is—somehow unavoidably--founded. The economic consciousness of the film reflects only one aspect of today's concerns. The film also deals with over-indulgence, fascism, state propaganda, and the manipulation of the workforce primarily through fear and surveillance. To this extent it is a classical dystopia, extrapolating current conditions in order to examine the problems of the present in the "safe" context of sci-fi futurism. The ruler, President Snow (Donald Sutherland), is not shy about expressing the dark agenda which underlies the Hunger Games themselves, a brutal gladiatorial-style conflict in which twenty-four young men and women, selected at random, compete in a battle to the death to win honor for their districts. Snow tells Seneca Crane (Wes Bentley), the impresario who runs the Games, "Hope . . . is the only thing stronger than fear." But, too, in Snow's eyes "A lot of hope is dangerous." Certainly the higher authorities in this futuristic nation of Panem spare no opportunity for bloodshed in order to maintain the status quo that keeps the wealthy in power. Their personal visual excess, emphasized through extreme style and garish make-up, marks them out as the vestiges of a decadent society destined for decline.

What defines the post-9/11 apocalyptic film is a concern with the inevitability of destruction, and the presentation of a future in which all that we have left is faith. In The Hunger Games it is the catchphrase of the elite, "May the odds be ever in your favor" that is perhaps most revealing. Of course it is ironic, since in a nation like Panem, the odds are never in your favor if you are poor enough to need them to be. Just as the working class are dominated and exploited, the odds of 24/1 for you to survive the games themselves are certainly not in the participants' favor. This and the other post-9/11 films discussed here are systematically characterized by a loss of belief in change. Human agency has been lost. In these bleak depictions of the future there is no room left for the utopian impulse, only the desperate

need to survive in a world that has been destroyed not by one specific threat as such, but by any one of a number of end-game scenarios. These are certainly not films which celebrate the end rather their purpose appears to be to mourn the loss of the future. Why do we watch them? Perhaps in order to find something which lies outside the system of capital, circulating around the globe, touching every aspect of life. Maybe because Jameson's assertion, that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, is the resulting reality of a catastrophic loss of faith in change. Or maybe it is in order to remind ourselves of the bleakness of the future, like trying to pinch oneself in order to wake-up as if from a nightmare unfolding.

Lars Von Trier's late 2011 film Melancholia is an example of just how far the inevitability of destruction has come in post-9/11 film. Melancholia is one of those rare examples of a film in which the world does actually end, and, as the filmmaker would have it, for good. Given that the main protagonist, Justine (Kirsten Dunst), is battling against depression, there is certainly nothing light-hearted about this apocalypse, a cosmic one portrayed as the collision of the Earth with another planet (mirrored in a preparatory opening scene). No science can prevent the world from ending, and it is entirely beyond the control of the characters. This is a fact made overt through Justine's brother-in-law John, played by Kiefer Sutherland – normally renowned for his almost omnipotent powers in fighting terrorist apocalypses in the popular TV show 24. John is an astronomer, a man of science, convinced that the two planets will pass harmlessly by each other. By the end of the film it has become obvious that science will not win the day and that in fact the world will end. John promptly commits suicide. Is this the logical conclusion of the kind of end-of-worldism that has been prevalent over the last decade? Writing in 2012, we have reached yet another end point with another predicted apocalypse upon us. Fascinated as

we are by ends, perhaps in our current state it would be far better off to think about beginnings and re-imaginings than what is perhaps the easiest of ways out: the end of all. While post-9/11 apocalyptic films may often have more to say about society and the future of the planet than those 1990s Hollywood spectacles, surely their message of hopelessness leaves no room for building a better future. On some level, those crass and populist blockbusters at least sent the message that something could be done to change the world, that yes, humanity could save the planet.

ⁱ Archaeologies of the Future, (London: Verso, 2005), 199.

ⁱⁱ articles.cnn.com/2001-09-11/us/bush.speech.text_1_attacks-deadly-terrorist-acts-despicable-acts?_s=PM:US

ⁱⁱⁱ It is rare to find a book or essay that does not begin by suggesting that 9/11 “changed everything,” or at least that does not begin by dealing with this concept, perhaps in order to dismiss it as oversimplification as Susan Faludi does in The Terror Dream: What 9/11 Revealed about America, (London: Atlantic Books, 2008), 2.

^{iv} The Spirit of Terrorism, (New York: Verso, 2002), 26-7.

^v Even those film articles that seem to profess an interest in post-9/11 aesthetics, such as Mathias Nilges’s ‘The Aesthetics of Destruction Contemporary US Cinema and TV Culture’, seem to fall short of really addressing this change in the nature of the image on display talked about here by Baudrillard.

^{vi} Stephen Prince’s book Firestorm American Film in the Age of Terrorism, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009) provides a very adequate groundwork for dealing with the question “what films were produced after 9/11” but is shy when it comes to placing these cultural products within any kind of theoretical framework.

^{vii} Film/Genre, 60.

^{viii} London: Wallflower Press, 2001, 79.

^{ix} Figures courtesy of www.boxofficemojo.com.

^x Interestingly enough both World Trade Center and United 93 also failed to live up to their billing, only managing roughly \$100m between them, perhaps justifying studios' hesitations with regards to dealing directly with 9/11.

^{xi} Disaster Movies, 93.